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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the program and general details of the Learning Disabilities Clinic (LDC) at the Southampton University (England) School of Education, which focuses on the students' curriculum and stresses close co-operation with the school. The program makes the students active agents in developing their own strategies with LDC help. Students are referred from secondary school psychological services for help with specific learning difficulties. The program described here contained 15 students, aged 12 to 17 years; they meet for 2, 1-hour individual lessons a week. Assistance is given in reading, spelling, oral skills, work in school subjects, and counseling for literacy handicaps. Most students have reading and spelling difficulties, lack confidence for literacy-based tasks, and are unable to cope with school. Teachers may use tape recorders, microcomputers, photo-enlarging, selective highlighting, and duplicated notes as tools and strategies to help students. The special needs coordinator, part of every secondary school program in Southampton, insures that the student can exercise in schools what is learned at the Clinic; parents, school subject teachers, and the educational psychologists also play a vital role. (Contains seven references.) (NAV)

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Appropriate Help for Secondary School Students With Specific Learning Difficulties

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APPROPRIATE HELP FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Virginia Kelly

CONTEXT

The Learning Disabilities Clinic is based in the Southampton University School of Education and run in conjunction with Southampton's special educational services department. Students come from local secondary schools, referred by the Schools Psychological Service for help with specific learning difficulties.

There are currently fifteen students, aged between twelve and seventeen. Typically, students come for two one-hour individual lessons a week, and the two LDC teachers work closely with Southampton's Reading Advisory teachers and school staff. Teaching is done at the School of Education, but LDC teachers make frequent consultative visits to the students' schools.

Most students are still having severe reading difficulty at the time of referral and their spelling ranges from the creative to the chaotic. All lack confidence for literacy-based tasks and many are distressed about their inability to cope with school.

In the lifetime of the LDC, there have been five teachers, as well as our original director. All have contributed to the LDC's philosophy and techniques. And, of course, we draw on a wide community of researchers and practitioners, to whom we are grateful.

WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT?

Help is given in five inter-related areas:

— Reading
— Spelling
— Development of oral skills
— Support for work in school subjects
— Counselling in managing the literacy handicap

These elements must be blended together for clients whose ages, backgrounds, strengths, weak points and aspirations vary widely. We must try to make our work effective on an average of two hours a week of individual teaching time, plus a bit of extra time for contact with school staff. There is no 'programme' into which everyone can be slotted which will do this job! Instead, a way of working and a range of resources are combined in an effort to remediate weak spelling and reading skills and, at the same time, to help our students work as nearly as possible on a par with the rest of their school group.

Key elements in the LDC's approach are:

— a teaching technique known as 'scaffolding';
— focus on curriculum, with the other strands twined around this wherever possible;
— training the student to use existing skills efficiently;
— use of supporting devices, such as tape recorders or microcomputers, to facilitate curricular access;
— a structured approach to spelling;
— co-ordination of other sources of possible support, such as school and parents.

The essence of our work is that these elements are strongly woven together, with the student being encouraged to take an active part in defining which are most useful to him. In this way, students not only improve individual literacy skills, they also practise a way of working which will gradually lead to independence. The LDC teacher must pick from a wide knowledge of possible resources and help each student organise this selection into an individual support pattern.

To give some insight into how this works, each of the key elements will be discussed in turn.

SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding is a partnership approach to teaching, in which teacher and learner undertake a task together several times and in several situations (Wood et al, 1976; Greenfield, 1984; Moore, 1988). From the beginning, the whole of a real task is done together. At first the teacher does most of the planning and executes the more difficult parts of the operation, with the learner helping. As they go along, the teacher explains not only *what* they are doing, but also *why*. In the course of several examples, the elements of the activity are revealed by the discussion. Explanation includes making explicit the possible choices there are and why a particular course of action is chosen rather than some other. The learner practises by gradually taking over more and more of the task, helped as necessary by comments from the teacher which emphasize reasoning wherever possible.

The first important idea is that the behaviour of the teacher is modelled not only at the level of what the learner can see, but by revealing the thinking behind it. The second is that, as the learner gains knowledge and confidence, the amount of 'scaffold' or support is reduced to match his new expertise. But, because of the partnership, the task is always completed successfully.

The scaffolding idea is useful across almost all our teaching, but particularly for complex tasks such as reading and writing of extended pieces. The learner is gradually invited to take over the role of 'teacher' and lead the discussion of choices and reasons for decision. The process is one of continual refinement of reasoning through use and increasing independence for the learner.

FOCUS ON THE CURRICULUM

By uniting scaffolding support with a focus on the student's curriculum problems, we encourage active involvement by the student and hence carry-over from work at the LDC into school. In general, our students arrive hating the fact that they still need extra help with reading and spelling. They want to get on with their subjects 'like everybody else'. If we can show them that the work they do at the LDC is designed to help them accomplish the subject-teachers' tasks rather than to give them 'extra English', we become allies in a common struggle. This approach also facilitates links between the LDC and school staff, establishing a common ground of subject work in which we both wish to help the student succeed*.

Students are asked to reflect, with their LDC teacher's help, on just what their classroom problems are. This taps a valuable source of expertise about the problems

*For a few students this approach is inappropriate; their distress in school is too great to allow fruitful work to be done on anything connected with school. For these students some other 'way in' must be found; often it is in learning to use the computer. Later we will move back towards school.

and also explicitly involves the student in seeking solutions. A list of commonly used types of support is available for use with schools and students (see Appendix 1).

There are several broad categories of help:

— Help with mastering vocabulary (meanings, reading and writing)
— Help with completing work by by-passing weak reading and/or writing skills
— Training in using aids (word processing, tape recorders and scribes), which the student can later use in school
— Training in study skills

It is usually the help in completing work which looms largest in the student's list of needs. Six or eight subjects are all covering new ground; they are also introducing new techniques of work sheets, text reading, note taking, summarising and writing up. Our students desperately need help in coping efficiently. Otherwise, in a losing battle to keep up with reading and written work, the meaning of what they are doing at school is largely lost and they fall further behind.

We try not to duplicate what is being taught in school, but to help the student learn to take advantage of what the school lessons offer. There are two differing ways to do this, which are complementary in practice. The first is to help students use the skills they have more efficiently and the second is to by-pass a weakness, at least temporarily, to allow the student to get on with the rest of his learning.

USING SKILLS EFFICIENTLY

Students practising the higher skills of finding the main points of text, note taking and summarising before they have solved the problems of decoding may seem illogical. For our students who are still having decoding problems at twelve or over, it is a strategy to recommend. These students will probably always have some difficulty with decoding. What they need are *efficiency* aids, which will allow them to put their limited (inaccurate, subject to getting stuck, or very slow) decoding skills to the best possible use.

The logic of this comes from two directions. Getting an overall view of the text or the task will give context, in which individual words are more meaningful and usually more easily read. And looking from the other end, if reading and note taking are difficult, material needs to be efficiently processed the first time through. These students cannot afford to read casually, make lengthy notes and reorganise them later. Finding main points and sub-headings must be done as they go.

Efficiency – getting the most back for the work you put in – appeals to our students, most of whom feel overburdened with work! The word has more appeal than 'study skills' and covers conventional study skills in their broadest sense. Techniques for analysing and organising work, such as scanning and essay planning, are taught within a framework that makes it clear when to use them. The idea is always to stress the aim, as well as the technique, to help the student learn how to approach large tasks in structured ways and to teach explicitly how to put limited decoding skills to the best possible use.

An illustration is what we call our 'Psyche it out' approach. This can be applied to most reading tasks, including worksheets, and involves finding out as much as *possible before* reading any words, then looking for key words, main headings and topic sentences. Layout, variations in typeface, boxes, numbering, illustrations and punctuation all provide clues to analysing the sheet and the tasks it is setting.

LEARNING DISABILITIES CLINIC,
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, SOUTHAMPTON UNIVERSITY

SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR STUDENTS

N.B. This list is not intended to be exclusive, but to suggest ideas.
Additional suggestions are most welcome.

Vocabulary Consolidation

Reading and spelling key words
Refining meanings
Lists for revision

Projects/Course Work

Planning longer work
Organisation
Study skills
Tape recording source material
Scribing

Practising Techniques

Laying out work correctly
Writing up experiments
Producing and labelling diagrams
Planning written (dictated) answers
Using a tape recorder for notes
Dictating longer answers
Others (as required)

Tape Recording

Notes (for revision)
Summaries
Dictations
Worksheets
Booklets, key chapters, etc. (for use in class or for homework)
Test papers (to use with a Walkman)

Scribing for Dictation

Essays
Homework
Answers to worksheet questions
Sections of project work

Students practise with the LDC teacher on work assigned from school. Reading help is given as needed, to enable the student to follow through to the end of the worksheet, and all the ways the cues can be used are made explicit. After several examples, the students each draw up their own 'Attack Plan' and are encouraged to use it, to explain how it works on specific examples and to modify it with experience. Appendix 2 is a sophisticated example for worksheets from an able third year student.

There are a number of good guides to study skills now on the market which offer advice on reading styles for different tasks, note making, time management and organisation, and tasks from school provide constant material for practise. The teacher needs to help the student see not only how but when to apply these techniques and how to break apparently amorphous, global tasks, such as 'read this for homework', into manageable sections which they know how to approach.

The types of text analysis and reconstruction suggested by Lunzer and Gardner in their *Learning from the Written Word* (1984) are extremely useful in helping students learn about reading for information. Passages are chosen to relate to school topics and are not simplified. The text is sent home with a tape beforehand or read together. The LDC teacher must initially be the discussion partner which the work requires to ensure the reasoning emerges explicitly, but this fits easily with our emphasis on students practising the role of teacher.

Activities for this work include labelling parts of the text, reassembling segmented text and re-presenting the context as notes, tables or diagrams. Many of our students find the emphasis on visual presentation – for instance, as flow diagrams – a great aid to understanding. Activities can be shared by students who do not meet by asking one to analyse a text and provide a task – such as finishing a table of the stages in a process – for another. They look forward to marking the finished work and the criticisms of the way the task was set that usually come with it are often enlightening!

The experience and explicit discussion of the common patterns behind different types of writing which arises from this work is helpful next time the student must read for himself. It also provides an explicit model for their own writing.

For writing tasks, planning techniques, diagrams and paradigm answers, all offer preparatory support where the production of words will be laborious. Joint work with the teacher on real activities from school is used to help the student realise how structured approaches work and that they really do promote efficiency. Training in judging the appropriate style and length for written assignments is a vital aspect.

USING SUPPORTING DEVICES

Besides helping students use their own skills efficiently, direct help with reading or writing is necessary where this will allow the student access to a more complex task which depends on it. The most common aids we use are tape recorders, teaching the student to dictate to a scribe and a microcomputer; other useful strategies include photo-enlarging, preparation of text (e.g. by selective highlighting) and duplicated notes.

I have mentioned already the constant struggle for many to keep up with work in subjects. But our view must be more long-term than just finishing particular pieces of work; we wish to provide help which moves the student towards independence and, ideally, improves his literacy skills as well. An extension of the idea of scaffolding works here. Strategies such as using tape recorders and dictating to a

scribe can be looked at as part of the temporary scaffold of support the teacher erects to help the learner. Within this framework, such aids can be seen as tools, to be used in a planning progression towards independence, rather than as 'giving in' or 'opting out'.

To make this idea work, we find it critical to remember to be consistently explicit with the student. As much as possible of the task must be turned over to him and both teacher and student must be clear about where and what the support is. This in turn helps student and teacher define the next step in the progression towards independence as the learner's skill increases. Work submitted to school is always annotated to show the support which has been given.

In the best case, use of a support device leads to access to work, which in turn feeds back into improved literacy. For example, in school, a teacher may have planned to extend and consolidate concepts and vocabulary by assigning a background article to read for homework and then conducting a class discussion. Our student would find the text very difficult to read, but, given a tape recording and a copy of the text the night before, he could become familiar with the reading, perhaps highlight the important points and be ready to join in the discussion. What he learns from the discussion will, in turn, support the student next time he tries to read material on the topic and, eventually, the taped support may become redundant.

Similarly, handwriting and spelling are only two of many skills involved in producing an essay; planning, composing and revising the content and phraseology can all be practised by a very poor speller if he is given the use of a competent scribe. When work is scribed on a word processor, students gain from watching the developing text and can often revise work themselves. Monitoring of LDC students using this type of support indicates that gains in vocabulary use, reading fluency and composition skills often release sufficient time and instill sufficient confidence for the student gradually to undertake the original writing.

Tape recorders, especially small ones with ear-phones, have many applications. Many students find it useful to record notes or classroom dictations; these may be kept on tape or transcribed later. Students who can copy accurately but cannot read back their own writing may have their notebooks and lists of key words read onto tape for revision. Taped exam papers used with a personal stereo can be a life saver for readers who otherwise get stuck. For really poor writers, many teachers will accept at least occasional tape recorded essays.

Dictating, whether to a tape recorder or to a scribe, is a specialised technique and requires training for the student. So does using a tape effectively in conjunction with a printed text – providing this training, during LDC lessons, helps to minimise any potential disruption to school classrooms when the student begins to use a tape recorder there. The use of tape or scribe will make the student 'different' and could require adjustments to classroom routine and the teacher's method of marking in some cases. However, many students and teachers find that, for seriously handicapped readers and writers, the benefits far outweigh the problems. Above all, they enable the student to be learning in his subjects, along with his peers, not falling still further behind because of one particular skill deficit.

Where tapes and/or a scribe need to be used extensively, there can be problems in organising sufficient help. Reading onto tape and taking dictation are both time consuming and it is rare that sufficient help is easily available. However, parents and even other students may be able to help.

Using a Microcomputer

A high quality IBM microcomputer is extensively used by both teachers and students at the LDC, primarily as a word processor and simple data handler. Ease of correction and revision and the production of neat finished copy are important benefits of word processing. Neat print-out allows work done by one student to be read by others. Ease of use, an uncluttered screen display and good colours are important in selecting a suitable program. Typing may be shared by teacher and student, and a student can edit a piece which was originally dictated.

Keyboard skills are not a problem for most students. We insist on use of both hands, beginning in a standard typing position and then using whatever finger feels comfortable. Several students spell noticeably better when word processing than when writing. They give variations of two reasons: 1) "My fingers get used to where the letters are". 2) "On the screen I can see if it's wrong, so I try to fix it". Some students find the reverse, however; if handwriting is an important part of learning words for them, they may find the shift to typing disruptive. We never insist in these cases and would use the word processor only for scribing.

For scribing, the word processor offers the advantage of an easily shared view of the screen. The student can watch the developing text and read back bits which are under consideration. Sharing the writing task between teacher and student – having a student edit a piece which he has originally dictated, typing alternate paragraphs or having the teacher take over when a student has begun to tire – provides steps towards independence. When these pieces are printed, there is no trace of who did what, so a careful note is kept of the type of co-operation on each piece. Again, work submitted to school is always annotated to show what support has been given.

With the word processor *Mind Reader*, after the first three letters of a word are typed, a list of up to five possible words appears; typing the number of any word inserts the whole word into the text. Increased writing speed and discriminating reading of similar words are the usual benefits for the student.

The program is no help where there is a mistake in the first three letters of a word or where the student is not attentive to the lists as they appear on the screen. Like any device, this one does not do the thinking for the student; it is useful partly because learning to use the aid involves thinking about language.

For students for whom typing provides a significant advantage over handwriting and where technical support is available, very small lap-top computers may provide a really useful support. These have a small viewing screen, but provide a basic word processing facility which can be used in any classroom or at home. The text can then be sent to a full-size computer for final editing.

Other Supportive Aids

Tape recording, scribing and microcomputers are major support aids which require considerable investment of time for effective use. Other aids may be less comprehensive, but highly effective in particular circumstances. For instance, enlarging texts on a good photocopier can make a significant difference to readability for some students and also allow for highlighting or otherwise marking key passages. Photocopying onto tinted paper may also be helpful. With training, students can learn to be responsible themselves for initiating and collecting such material.

Note taking is often a particular problem. Provision of typed notes or a carbon or photocopy of notes made by another student with neat writing will give the student an accurate record.

For some students the colour of the background makes a significant difference when reading. For instance, they can read from a green chalkboard, but not a blackboard. An acetate overlay, usually in a pale colour, may make reading from books easier. Experimentation will be necessary to find what suits each individual; the important effect seems to be in cutting down the glaring difference between foreground text and background. For these students photocopying text onto tinted paper may be helpful.

Spelling aids of various sorts are available, including microchip word finders and specialised dictionaries. The latter include dictionaries organised by sound and ones in which wrong but phonetically correct spellings are listed, together with the real spelling. Lists of key subject words used as bookmarks are not less useful for being an old and cheap remedy.

Important clues about what techniques will help students will arise from an inquiring attitude by both teacher and student as to what – exactly – makes any particular classroom activity difficult. Global activities need to be broken down into more specific parts. If Geography homework is a problem, which part? Finding the assignment? Reading the worksheet? Planning the answers? and so on. Students themselves often know or can discover by reflection just where the difficulty lies; the art of discovery is in learning to ask the right questions.

SPELLING

A structured spelling programme, based on rules and consistent multi-sensory practice, is essential for most students with specific learning difficulties. Within this strand of our work we also include the inter-related, although not identical, strategies which support analysis of unknown words in reading.

Whether continuing or initiating such a programme, we stress strengths, helping the student see what he *can* do, as well as define what he needs to work on. A string of letters that appears bizarre if pronounced may, nevertheless, be the right length for the word that was intended; it may even have ascenders and descenders in about the right places. This may mean there is a visual memory in there struggling to get out. Other students make reasonable phonic approximations, but have poor memory for the look of words and need help in learning to consider and choose between possible alternative structures. Most students desperately need to see that they are doing something *right* if they are to persevere.

Emphasis is put on helping each student find a way of approaching and learning words which work for him. The teachers must be systematic, but not inflexible, choosing from a wide knowledge of language rules and multi-sensory practice methods to find an effective mix which takes account of each student's particular strengths and weaknesses. Plastic letters, simultaneous oral spelling, cursive handwriting, packs of practice cards for letter groups, word games and specialised dictionaries may all play a part. Always there will be strong links with speaking and listening, and an emphasis on reasoning and making choices.

Some strategies for spelling and word study which might be confusing for younger pupils are appropriate to our students. For example, the concept of a root word and its derivatives becomes widely useful with their expanded vocabularies. Many of the more difficult spelling decisions are illuminated by considering root words. Consider *decide* and *beside*. The 's or c?' decision is not based on sound, but on their place in two very different groupings:

side	*decide*
inside	decided
beside	deciding
outside	decisive

... and so on. Two further examples are words where the spelling of a longer derivative helps with the root (as in *sign* and *signal*, *insignia* and *designation*) and the vexed problem of '*-ents* or *-ence*?', which is solved by knowing that -ents is a plural. We study endings particularly, using many forms of practice to help the student learn to spot them quickly. This includes endings added to endings, as in the progression:

nation
national
nationalise
nationalisation

Root words still have to be learned, but they in turn unlock large groups of other words.

Most of these more complex spelling patterns are absorbed by good readers in the course of their reading and used even where they could not make the rule explicit. Bringing them to the attention of our students is the spelling equivalent of teaching higher order reading skills – unlocking a wide range of mature words and providing a new approach, which in turn may bring fresh insights to bear on the original difficulty.

Active links are made between spelling work and words needed for school. The new subject-specific vocabulary with which secondary students must cope provides many opportunities for practising clear pronunciation, dividing words into syllables, looking for letter groups and finding variations on a root word. Time spent this way does double duty by helping with mastery of words for school subjects, as well as spelling rules, and this provides motivation for students.

The LDC students are jointly compiling a computer file of the words they need for topics in each subject. Students cull the words from their exercise books, supplemented by the memory of what went on in class and the LDC's collection of reference books. Selecting important words for each topic is a useful study skill in itself and the scaffolding technique is used to move the student towards independence: a long time is spent choosing, discussing, clarifying and typing words in the early stages; then we work towards a state where students can compile their own lists and type them into the computer themselves.

The finished lists can be sorted and printed out in several forms by the computer. They are used for reading practice, kept in exercise books for spelling references and form useful revision aids, which evoke memories of the lesson in which the words occurred. We are in our third year of word collection and comparing lists on the same topic from different students, schools and years is becoming a stimulating topic for oral work.

PROVIDING CO-ORDINATION

Even a brief outline of some strands of our work raises the twin questions: How can we keep track of what is going on? and How can we co-ordinate what we do with the other possible helpers involved with our student?

The main answer to record-keeping is an individual notebook for each student containing a note for everything under the day's date. Both the student and teacher write in it. It is used, for example, as a note pad in word study, for dictation and handwriting, for running records of reading behaviour (Clay, 1985) and to keep notes of consultations with parents and schools. Word processed work is photocopied and filed in it. At the back are check-lists of sounds, spelling rules, reading activities, etc. – and these are filled in and dated as they are covered. All together the notebook forms an evocative, cumulative record of all our activity, including our feelings about it, which is accessible to the student and teacher at any time. At least once every half term we go over it together, making lists of what we have worked on and what we plan to do in the next phase. These lists then form the basis of any written reports and these too are always read through with the student before they are sent.

Key people among the many who may be involved in helping our students are parents, the school special needs co-ordinator, school subject teachers and the educational psychologist. Reports go to all of these several times a year, but we encourage as many informal contacts as possible along the way. Information sheets (often written at least partly by students), open house events and visits all play a part. A particularly successful method of exchanging information has been the development of student panel discussions. These began four years ago with a group of students showing techniques and resources which they found helpful to interested PGCE candidates. Panels now occur about four times a year for a variety of groups, including teachers in training, Masters Degree candidates interested in reading and trainee educational psychologists.

The panel discussions have proved so stimulating that a group of students and trainee educational psychologists embarked last year on making a video along a similar theme. The greatest value of this was in the making, but a usable product – twenty minutes on 'Living with Dyslexia' – is now available for sharing.

Parents play a vital role in supporting these students and we try to be as accessible as possible to them and also to make our approach and resources freely available to them. Where we are seeing a student only twice a week, practice at home and in school, as well as at the LDC, is essential. The kind of help parents can give (and students can accept) varies. During one week, help we knew about included providing transport to lessons, tape recording school notebooks, typing out vocabulary lists, being interviewed, sharing reading, taking dictation of homework essays, reading out spelling words, playing spelling and reading games, listening while students give practice talks and encouraging resistance to teasing. On the direct teaching side, schemes such as 'Pause, Prompt and Praise' (Merrett) for training reading helpers are of great value, because they offer easily appreciated structural guidelines which keep the essence of the help along the right lines.

The lynch-pin of co-ordination of our work with school is the Special Needs Co-ordinator, now found in all Southampton secondary schools. This is usually the person who can make it possible for our student to exercise in school what is learned with us, smoothing the path to photocopiers, word processor, extra library time or whatever and helping to find scribes and readers when these are necessary. It is frequently possible to share the work on a spelling programme between LDC and school, and here the co-ordinator is vital.

Subject teachers within schools give us valuable information about the demands on skills within their subjects and the response of our students in class. Frequently they

can identify key areas where support would enable students to cope – and they are often very receptive to suggestions. The interchange of ideas and information between LDC teachers and teachers in schools is a useful form of in-service training for us all.

A CLOSING WORD

No single paper can cover everything we do. In selecting what to present here, I have tried to concentrate on the organising principles of our way of working and on those aspects of particular practice which derive from our focus on secondary school students.

Support services which involve students leaving their classrooms are now controversial. However, the expertise to help our students does not exist in all – or even most – secondary schools and is efficiently provided by a specialist team. By focusing on the student's curriculum, stressing close co-operation with school and making students active agents in developing their own strategies with LDC help, we seek the best of both worlds.

In addition, our students – many of whom feel they fail in school – gain confidence from working in a prestigious academic community. They profit from meeting others with similar problems and comparing solutions. And their presence in the university provides a focus for disseminating information about specific learning difficulties to teachers, teachers in training and research workers.

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